APPEARED
PAGE A19

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Like a Movie

Every time Soviet radio switches to classical music and a new leader is installed in the Kremlin, the op-ed pages of U.S. newspapers sprout with essays by Soviet specialists wondering if the new boy will be able to control the military.

Without indulging ourselves in Beethoven or anything, the time has come for us to ask the same question about our leader, Ronald Reagan. Can he control the military?

The answer seems to be no. His National Security Council seems to be an outpost of the military, headed by an admiral, John Poindexter, who succeeded a colonel, Robert McFarlane. Next in charge when it comes to derring-do is a lieutenant colonel, Oliver North Jr., who is the Errol Flynn of the operation, and above them all is that ex-Marine by way of Merrill Lynch, Donald Regan.

What they all lack in foreign policy experience, they make up in chutzpah. Show them a foreign policy dilemma, and they'll mistake it for a beach.

The most recent beach hit is, of course, Iran. In contravention of U.S. policy, Regan's Rangers proved that (1) we would bargain for the release of American hostages and (2) we are not neutral in the Iran-Iraq war. With the cooperation of the Israelis, Regan's Rangers have shipped arms to the Iranians, managing, it seems, to secure the freedom of three hostages and, in the process, putting in peril all Americans who happen to be in the Middle East.

As for U.S. credibility, it no longer exists. What we vowed we would not do, we simply did.

Ronald Reagan himself has always had a weakness for the simple, the cinematic. He likes the bold stroke. He sees the world with a kind of charming simplicity, and in this he has been indulged. The invasion of Grenada, a kind of sandlot war, was greeted as so stunning a success that it reinforced the president's tendency to ask the cavalry to do what diplomats should.

The Iran operation is a case in point. It promised results, it was bold, it was secret and, maybe best of all, if it worked it would bring home the hostages just before the congressional elections. So the plan, once dormant, was brought back to life.

But what now? The credibility of the United States is in shreds. As with the Daniloff affair, we said we would not bargain—and then we did. Throughout the Middle East, terrorists now know the unit price of an American. He or she is worth a shipload of tank and artillery ammunition, some rifles, a cake in the shape of a key and a Bible. The actual goods are probably subject to bargaining, but not the principle involved. We will deal.

As in Watergate, a president has established an entire apparatus to do his personal bidding. The normal agencies for the promulgation and execution of foreign policy have been bypassed. Congress was kept in the dark; the State Department was told to butt out; the CIA was shunned.

North and a former National Security director, McFarlane, were dispatched on missions that were as silly as they were exciting. After all, the operation relied on the willingness of the factions in Iran to keep mum. Predictably, one did not.

All of Congress is now in the hands of Democrats. On all the talk shows, its leaders issued the required growls, asserting they will look into this or that. By January, when Congress convenes, there will undoubtedly be new polls certifying the president's popularity, and if the past is any guide, the Democrats will turn their attention to trade and the public hanging of drug dealers. The formulation and execution of foreign policy by a bunch of movie-stricken presidential aides will be forgotten.

But it should not be. The likelihood is that Regan's Rangers did not limit themselves to Nicaragua or Iran, and that their activities have been as boundless as their imaginations—and maybe illegal to boot.

If, as Regan's Rangers seem to think, real life is like a movie, Congress ought to respond in kind. I suggest "All the President's Men."